

Matter of Fact

Standfast's Reward

By Joseph Alsop

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THE FIRST thing to strike anyone returning from a Far Eastern journey is the quality of the current talk about the Vietnam war. The President's opponents treat the war as a mere whim of Lyndon Johnson's, with no real aim or purpose of its own.

Maybe this phenomenon should be linked, for example, with Sen. J. William Fulbright's decidedly potish refusal to have a first-hand look at the war, when Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge invited the Senator to come to Saigon as his guest some months ago. At any rate, those who have serious first-hand knowledge of Asia are bound to be struck, above all, by the gains already resulting from the President's decision to stand fast in Vietnam.

Partly, this is a matter of the basic trend of events in Asia. En route, this reporter ran into one of the wisest participants in the last two regional meetings of U.S. ambassadors, held in the winters of 1965 and 1966 at Baguio. Those twelve months, he remarked, had made the difference between the darkest hopelessness and pretty high hopes for the future.

IN 1965, the assembled American ambassadors did not expect the President's standfast decision. From South Korea and Japan, round the long crescent through Taiwan and the Philippines to Indonesia, Malaya and Burma, these experienced observers were gloomily calculating the local effects of a Communist victory in South Vietnam.

To be sure, they lacked Sea Fulbright's pre-eminent advantage of non-contact with the hard facts. Being reformists, no doubt, by their dusty, day-to-day experience, they had a sad tendency to believe in the so-called domino theory.

In 1965, therefore, the assembled American diplomats expected a Communist victory in South Vietnam to produce truly disastrous political consequences throughout Asia. Whereas this year, the participants in the same regional conference broadly expected Asian political development to follow a rational and hopeful course.

In the long run, to be sure, much will still depend upon the final outcome in Vietnam. But it is also worth noting that certain gains have already been made that are much more solid and tangible than a mere change of atmosphere and trend. The most obvious case in point is Indonesia.

IN INDONESIA, the army leaders who offered last-minute resistance to the attempted Communist takeover were of course not inspired by Lyndon Johnson. But the fact remains that if the President had failed to stand fast in Vietnam, the majority of the Indonesian generals would surely have judged their own cause to be hopeless, and would therefore have sought the best terms they could get from the Indonesian and Chinese Communists.

Most of the generals would probably have accepted the Chinese invitation to come to Peking for last year's Oct. 1 celebration—so badly extended to scores of Indonesian army leaders on the eve of the attempted Communist coup d'etat.

But this did not happen. Instead, lunatic, sudden, egomaniacal Sukarno has

been all but stripped of power. Something at last is being done for the wretched people of Indonesia. And the insane "confrontation" with Malaysia is being ended.

If you count up all the other things that have not happened, because a Communist victory in Vietnam was prevented, it would make a long list. Take Laos, for instance.

Here the jerry-built neutralization that Sen. Robert Kennedy sometimes boasts about would have collapsed immediately after a Communist success across the border, and the North Vietnamese would long since have taken control of Laos by main force. This was foreseen, indeed, when President Kennedy sponsored the neutralization of Laos, on the specific ground that South Vietnam was the main theater of the struggle in Southeast Asia.

IN THE REAL heartland of Asia, meanwhile, in Communist China, extremely positive developments are occurring because Mao Tse-tung's prophecies were proved wrong in Vietnam. If the United States had obediently assumed the "paper tiger" role, Chinese opposition to Maoist communism would surely have been paralyzed, at any rate for the time being.

Instead, China is now internally convulsed, apparently because certain opponents of Maoism have acted prematurely. They may suffer. But when old Mao goes to his maker, China's rationalists and pragmatists are now pretty certain to triumph—unless the President's standfast decision is eventually reversed to please Sen. Fulbright.

This in turn illuminates the central point. Communists happen to be the enemy in Vietnam. But an eventual success there will be much less a Communist defeat, than a victory for political rationality, peaceable dealings and common sense approaches throughout Asia.

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